

Citing Sources: Why and How

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Why We Cite

We cite a source so we can...

- find it again and
- evaluate its weight as evidence.

Finding a record again

Example of a bad citation:

“*The Smith Family*, red book on top shelf at local library”

How do we know this is a bad citation?

- What if we are (or someone else is) at another library?
- What if the library gets new books and moves all of them?
- What if the book is re-covered in blue?
- What if we find another *The Smith Family* and need to determine if it is a different edition, reprint, etc.?
- What if our cousin e-mails us claiming *The Smith Family* says something different than we claim?

Ask yourself questions like these to help determine if you have all the information you need

If any of these issues arose we could not find our book again or determine if the other book is the same *The Smith Family*. In other words, we can't identify our source, we can only identify a specific copy of a book as long as it is not moved. This is not a citation.

Absolute basic book citation:

- Author
- Title
- Publisher
- Publication place
- Publication year

This identifies the book that is our source.

We need to cite a source for the exact information, too:

- Page number

If someone says they have different information “from the same book,” how else could we determine if it is the same book without actually seeing both books?

- Edition
- Reprint
- Revised
- Multiple volumes
- Paper book or electronic book
- Electronic book – images or transcribed

Knowing these details helps us identify the exact source for our information.

Evaluating Evidence

If someone said they found different information on the same page of *The Smith Family* do you wonder:

- if it is a different edition or revised copy?
- if it is a paper copy of the book versus an electronic copy?
- what kind of electronic copy?

You are using the citation to help you evaluate the evidence presented.

How good is this source?

- Was this source recopied from its original?
- Did the informant have firsthand knowledge or are they repeating information from another informant or source?
- Is my question answered or do I need more information?

Was this source recopied from its original?

- Could there be an error in this information because it was recopied?
- Was the person who recopied it likely to have made a mistake?
- Was it their job to make a copy (i.e. a court clerk)?
- Does their work in general appear to be careful or sloppy?
- Is this a photographic (exact) copy or a recopying by hand/typing?
- The answer to this question is important to “finding a source again” as well as with regards to evaluating evidence.
- If a **source** is original or recopied it is referred to as:
 - Original source or
 - Derivative source

Did the informant have firsthand knowledge or are they repeating information from another informant or source?

- Was the informant present at the event?
- Is the informant capable of giving the details from their knowledge (ex. an infant could be present but would not have memory of the event)?
- Can you even identify the informant of the information given?
- This information is not usually listed as an official part of a citation. We can add notes to our text or to the end of our citation.
- If *information* is firsthand or secondhand it is referred to as:
 - Primary information or
 - Secondary information

Is my question answered or do I need more information?

- Does this information answer the question I am asking?
- Do I need more information before I can use the information given by this source?
- Is this information even relevant to the question I am asking?
- The *evidence* provided is classified as:
 - Direct evidence
 - ◊ The question is answered by the information given (and is obviously relevant information)
 - Indirect evidence
 - ◊ The information is relevant but does not answer the question without further information from another source.
 - ◊ This is what we often refer to as “clues.”
- If the information is irrelevant to our question it does not provide “evidence.”

How good is this source? (cont.)

- Do **not** try to determine how good a source, information, or evidence is **quantitatively**.
- Similarly, do not try to quantitatively determine which fact is correct.
- One source can be good for answering one question but not for answering another question.
- Evidence evaluation is a **qualitative** study. The quality of your evidence is what is most important, not the quantity.
- Only experience will improve your ability to quickly identify good quality *evidence*.

You cannot boil your citations down to number values to use for evidence evaluation. Instead, you must record complete citations to help you evaluate the quality of your evidence for different questions.

How - Citation Examples

Census record from Ancestry.com

1880 U.S. Census, Lumpkin County, Georgia, population schedule, Nimblewell's Dist No. 840 G.M., Enumeration District (ED) 143, p. 15 (penned), 397C (stamped), 7 (crossed out), dwelling 134, family 134, Thos Hubank household; digital image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 17 February 2008); citing National Archives and Records Administration microfilm publication T9, roll 156.

Microfilm (whole file cited)

Eastern Cherokee Applications of the U.S. Court of Claims, 1906-1909, microfilm publication M1104 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1981), roll 158, application of Kimsey H. Townsend, #17384.

Civil War Union Pension (whole file cited)

Joseph Morris (Pvt., Co. K, 5th Tenn. Mtd. Inf., Civil War), pension application no. 493,221, certificate no. 356,100, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications..., 1861-1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Revolutionary War Pension on Footnote.com (specific item from file cited)

Affidavit of Thomas Townsend (age 79), 7 June 1832; Susannah Townsend, widow's pension application file W. 3889, for service of Thomas Townsend (Pvt., Col. Sumter's S.C. Regt., Revolutionary War); Case Files of Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Based on Revolutionary War Service; Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, 1800-1960; Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C.; digital images, "Revolutionary War Pensions," *Footnote.com* (<http://www.footnote.com> : accessed 23 January 2010); citing National Archives and Records Administration microfilm publication M804, roll 2405.

Bibliography

- Greenwood, Val D. "Organizing and Evaluating Research Findings." *Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, 3rd ed. Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1998. Pages 109-124.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 2007.
- Unites States. National Archives. *Citing Records in the National Archives of the Unites States*. General Information Leaflet 17. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2007. Available online: <http://www.archives.gov/publications/general-info-leaflets/17-citing-records.html>